



Defining a Manageable Downtown

Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan

INTRODUCTION

The geographic limit of Muskegon's Downtown is not formally defined or delineated. This has resulted in decentralization of development within the City's developed core, a lack of concentrated resources, and loss of potential business synergy.

This section of the plan delineates a manageable core downtown consisting of four distinct functional areas within which public and private resources should be focused so that the goals described in Section 3 can be attained. The geographic limits of the core downtown and downtown functional areas are based on an analysis of:

- ◆ The location and concentration of current activity centers, land uses (Figure 4.1), and anchor facilities;
- ◆ Physical geography, amenities, and history;
- ◆ Opportunity to concentrate additional, similar economic activity or like employment;
- ◆ Current synergism; and scale or distance.

DOWNTOWN CORE GEMS FUNCTIONAL AREAS

The analysis of Muskegon's Downtown resulted in the delineation of a core downtown area consisting of four distinct functional areas that exhibit compatible and complimentary land uses, activity centers, and anchor facilities that provide stability to

and draw high volumes of people into the downtown.

Collectively, the "GEMS" functional areas define and delineate the downtown core, and provide the opportunity to focus the downtown on geographic and functional areas and activities that are both compatible and complementary.

Each of the functional centers, with the exception of the Enterprise Center, possess recognized activity centers and anchor uses. GEMS functional centers are illustrated in Figure 4.1 and the current anchor facilities in Figure 4.2. GEMS functional centers are briefly described as follows:

Guest and Entertainment Center

The Guest and Entertainment GEMS Center includes Hackley Park, Frauenthal Theater, Walker Arena, the Hackley Library, the art museum, the County Historical Museum, Muskegon Mall, Western Avenue, and the Convention and Visitors Bureau housed in the renovated Union Rail Depot.

Enterprise Center

The Enterprise Center encompasses significant areas of vacant land along the Muskegon Lake shoreline, and areas of existing commercial and industrial development along the current and future Seaway Drive corridor.

Maritime Center

The Maritime Center includes vacant and developed land along the Muskegon Lake Shoreline.

Service Center

The Service Center encompasses City and County government facilities, and other nearby uses.



Defining a Manageable Downtown Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan

The GEMS acronym offers a relatively easy means of identifying the general focus and purpose of each functional area, though it is not intended for use as a marketing tool. It should be noted, however, that limited use of the functional area acronym and functional center names has proven successful during the process of preparing this plan. Subsequent public meetings and public feedback find participants employing the terms rather frequently, and with positive connotation.

Scale or distance issues became a significant factor during the process of delineating the downtown and GEMS functional centers. Employees and visitors to a downtown will regularly walk no more than six blocks to go from one facility to another. During the winter months, the distance is limited to three blocks. People employed in downtown areas making lunch trips generally do so to establishments within a three block area. While they will go further, such trips are less frequent, or involve the use of a vehicle.

Existing land use was also an important factor, particularly as it relates to separating the core downtown from nearby single-family residential neighborhoods. The Existing Land Use Map (shown in Figure 4.5) illustrates land uses within the core downtown.

Guest and Entertainment Center

The first of these functional areas is the Guest and Entertainment Center. Included within the boundaries are noted downtown activities and facilities such as Hackley Park, Frauenthal Theater, Walker Arena, major downtown hotel, public library,

public art museum, county historical museum, public transit station, and the mall. The Guest and Entertainment Center also includes the historic commercial strip along Western Avenue which includes the recently renovated depot and the Amazon Building.

The Guest and Entertainment Center abuts the shoreline Maritime Center. The Guest and Entertainment Center provides opportunity to concentrate a variety of entertainment, service, and retail uses in close proximity to existing facilities of local and regional significance, and to compliment the activities of the Maritime Center. As indicated, the Guest and Entertainment Center includes Western Avenue. Western Avenue is known for its historic structures and linkage to both the downtown and nearby historic residential districts. The Avenue is directly linked to the Walker Arena, Frauenthal Theater, Muskegon Mall, and County Depot, with nearby proximity to Heritage Landing. Western Avenue offers significant potential for commercial development of a specialty/theme nature, as well as basic services and facilities. Redevelopment of Western is key to not only its underlying functional center, but also the downtown core as a whole. Accordingly, this component offers additional detail and commentary regarding the Avenue. The subsequent section on Proposed Projects provides additional suggestions.

Above all, the Guest and Entertainment Center should be viewed as a way to bring people downtown for eating, cultural activities and experiencing a vibrant urban atmosphere that is a primary function of a City. The older, historic feel and proximity





Defining a Manageable Downtown Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan

to Muskegon Lake and other amenities establish a framework to build upon as this Center is further established. Anchor facilities for it are already present with the several restaurants, the beautiful Frauenthal Theater, the Muskegon Mall, the improving Walker Arena, and the Downtown Hotel. Additional restaurants, nightclubs and other retail/guest businesses could greatly facilitate the achievement of a 24 hour City center.

The historic buildings along Western Avenue are generally in good to excellent shape with few exceptions. The style of the architecture is unique to small Midwestern downtowns; one and two-story commercial and multi-story industrial buildings with quality brick and terra-cotta work and storefront windows. Typically as a city increases in size, these older, non-monumental buildings have been destroyed and replaced by featureless contemporary structures. Muskegon is unique in that these buildings remain with only minor changes to their original facades. Many of these buildings are still in use today, although they could be better or more thoroughly utilized.

The general image perceived along Western Avenue is of the chasms left in the urban fabric where buildings have been destroyed and replaced with parking or empty lots. Where buildings once provided a homogenous and textured streetscape, there are gaps that cause the flow of downtown to be interrupted and disturbed. This area is perceived to be too far from the heavier used portion of downtown, but as sensitive infill replaces the holes in the fabric, this area will become the important link

between downtown, the waterfront, and the historic neighborhood.

Many of the buildings along Western Avenue are kept in excellent condition, clean, and in continuous use. A few of the buildings detract from the quality only because they are not being used to their potential. Some of the structures detract from the quality because their abundant and grand windows have been boarded over. When these become functioning structures, with minor, sensitive architectural renovation to restore their former glory, they will become contributing factors to the style and glamour that could be achieved along Western Avenue.

The facade of the former hotel (593 though 603 Western) cannot be duplicated for style and significance. Typically, facadism is not recommended as a method of historic preservation, but this building is in very poor condition, with much of the existing structure already demolished. The facade could be salvaged in its existing position with a large, significant structure built to replace the portion of the hotel that has been demolished. This new building could lend itself to almost any function, including a health club or spa, theater, or science/aquatic center.

Due to alteration of its original facade, the Eagles complex is less than desirable in its architectural style; however, the buildings are maintained and have functioned well for the same owner for more than 50 years. This does provide a drawing influence to downtown for Eagle members, most of whom drive from the suburbs or other urban neighborhoods to this destination.



Defining a Manageable Downtown Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan

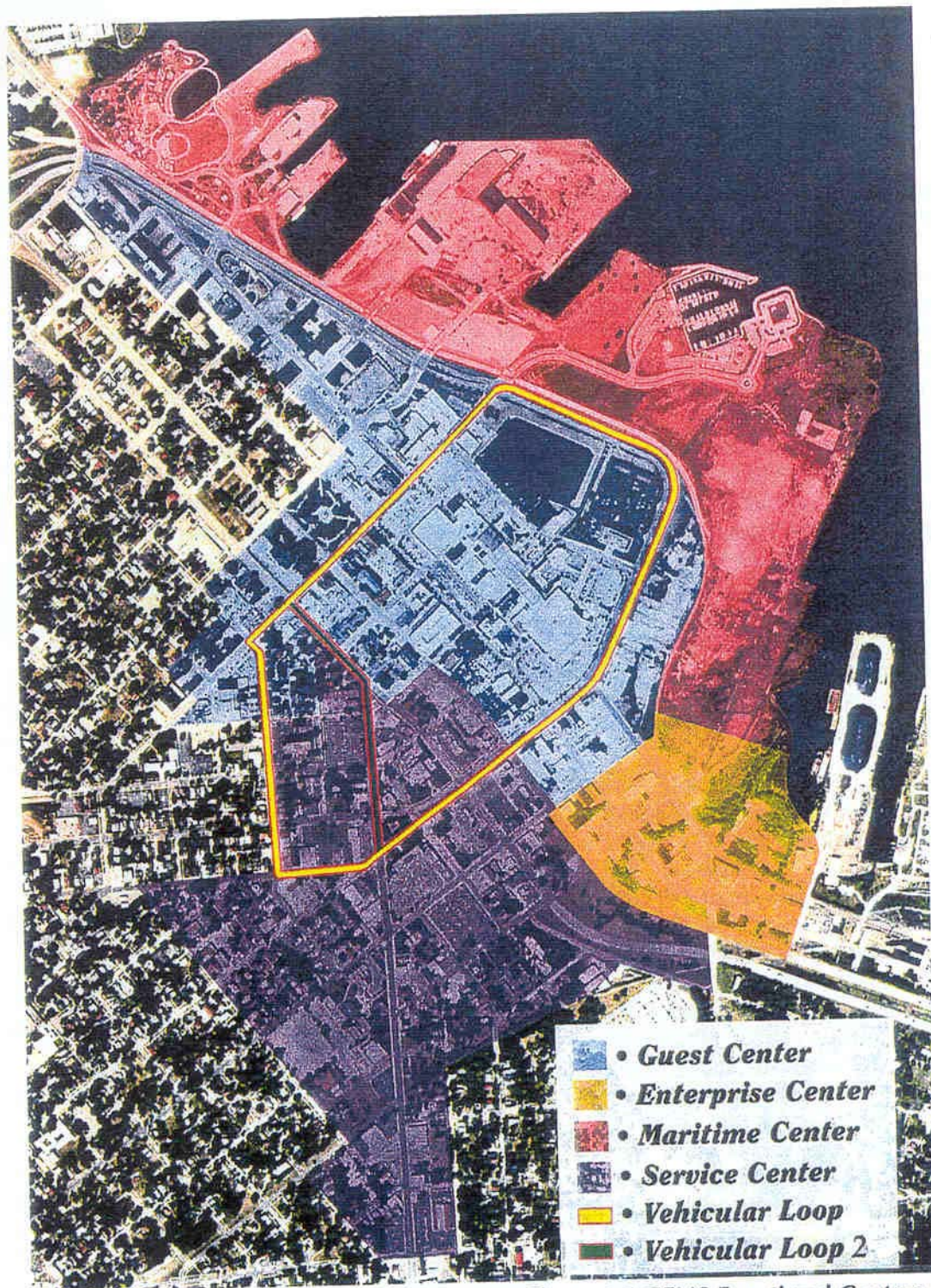


Figure 4.1 GEMS Functional Centers
City of Muskegon



Defining a Manageable Downtown Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan



Most of the buildings along Western back directly up to the historic neighborhood. If they were to provide the necessary services for the neighborhood, they would provide a link. Such uses could include a grocery store, a health facility, beauty/barber shop, banking, a hardware store, video store, coffee shop, bakery, restaurants, and entertainment facilities, including a small multi-purpose theater. They would provide much desired services to the neighborhood, as well as the working community of Downtown.

Muskegon Hardware already maintains a large storage facility and wholesale hardware business between the downtown and the neighborhood. Possibly opening a small hardware store specializing in historic restoration items would not be far from reality. The large red brick building (521 through 531 Western) across from the Amazon Building would make an excellent grocery store, with two-story shopping or studios above. The Boiler Works building (1196 Eighth Street) requires a fair amount of renovation, but could be used for housing, offices, shopping, museum, health club or spa, or education facility. Many of the smaller buildings would lend themselves nicely to shops, restaurants, bars, and professional offices.

One of the more prominent, but under utilized buildings along Western Avenue is the Amazon Building. Overall, the Amazon is in good condition and is a monumental structure in the downtown. It is in need of general repair, more intense usage, and potential demolition of smaller, deterring additions. The potentials for this building are somewhat limited because of its size. Retail would be best if restricted to the

lower level only. Because of the C-shape of the building, with the open courtyard toward the water front, the upper, narrow floors would provide top-quality office or residential space, with spectacular views of the lake and excellent natural lighting. These would make exceptional working artists studios, however, this would be a less desirable economic venture.

Adding mass to the Avenue is desirable to replace the lost architectural fabric. Eliminating surface parking in exchange for low-rise parking structures that have been sensitively designed to fit the historic neighborhood would be a desirable way to resolve the parking issue. However, the perception among those visiting downtowns is that parking is not available if they cannot see open parking lots. Unfortunately, this is also the wrongly perceived view when numerous small parking lots are provided at the rear of buildings. Existing street parking should be maintained as much as possible, as it provides scale to the building facades and will be reassuringly familiar to visitors.

Visual linkages could be formed with vistas through existing open spaces or possible as-framed vistas between infill structures. Upper story views along Western should remain open to the waterfront if possible. Excluding the Mart Dock because of its charm and character as a maritime facility, existing contemporary storage facilities on the waterfront must be addressed as visual clutter.

Enterprise Center

The second area is defined as the Enterprise Center. It consists of largely vacant or





Defining a Manageable Downtown Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan



under utilized land near the waterfront and in the vicinity of the yet-to-be-constructed next phase of Shoreline Drive. The land was once used primarily for industrial activity and commercial establishments. This area presents an excellent opportunity to establish a concentration of heavy commercial and high-tech, light industrial, and product development oriented business. The development of these employment generating activities should be enhanced by the extension of Shoreline Drive through this area.

Employment activity created in the area will have quality access to both the north and south, will have a competitive advantage in serving regional needs, and will provide additional clientele to the retail and service sector of the core downtown.

As the Enterprise Center develops, efforts to enhance the flow of its employees to the other Centers should be made. Open and safe pedestrian pathways between it and the other areas should be established, and efforts should be made to keep the architecture at human scale. The Shoreline Drive extension should incorporate the needs of pedestrians, and adequate access should be provided for all appropriate means of transportation.

The Enterprise Center offers investors a unique opportunity to locate in a downtown environment, rather than in an industrial park, air park, or other traditional location. The Enterprise Center can provide opportunities for the establishment of high-quality facilities in a secure, urban environment easily accessible to governmental, legal, business, entertainment, and lakeshore services.

There are numerous uses potentially suitable for placement in the Enterprise Center. These include professional and corporate office buildings; flex-space facilities for business and high-tech (non-polluting) industries; professional and business services such as the office of design professionals, print/reproduction operations, photographic and arts supply, and computer services; media productions; select sales facilities requiring outdoor display areas; marine design and supply; etc.

The Enterprise Center is not to be viewed as a future, heavy industrial area. The Center should be developed in high-quality, business park fashion, accommodating the uses referenced above or other enterprises determined to be appropriate. This may be accomplished utilizing the existing roadway network or through select street vacating and land assembly should the opportunity arise.

The Enterprise Center should include minimum design standards for all future projects. These include, but are not limited to:

- ◆ Prohibition of pole-type structures. This does not preclude steel buildings. However, steel buildings should be designed incorporating high-quality, long-lasting, facade materials such as brick. Such buildings should also include window treatment along public right-of-way to avoid the sterile appearance common to many industrial structures. Brick and glass buildings, and building incorporating unique designs and high-quality materials should be encouraged.



Defining a Manageable Downtown Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan





Defining a Manageable Downtown Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan

- ◆ Identification signs should be ground-mounted, monument varies, of high-quality design and materials. Pole signs should be prohibited.
- ◆ Sites involving yard areas should be well landscaped. This may include attractive landscape and architectural features and/or vegetation. Creative use of site lighting to highlight buildings and site features, and to enhance pedestrian safety should be encouraged.
- ◆ Security fencing, unless properly incorporated into the overall site design, should be discouraged. Cyclone, stockade, and similar fencing should be prohibited unless necessary for the security of buildings and equipment. In all cases, the visual impacts of such fencing should be mitigated through other site enhancements.
- ◆ Outdoor storage, except for the display of select automotive, marine, and recreational vehicles ready for direct retail sale, should be discouraged.

Of the four GEMS Centers, the Enterprise Center may have the greatest potential for full development within the shortest time span. This is largely due to the relatively small geographic size of the Center.

Maritime Center

The third area is the Maritime Center, which focuses upon much of the developed and undeveloped waterfront properties in the core of the City. The potential exists in this area to further capitalize on the water through the creation and development of

uses that complement other activities throughout the downtown. The Maritime Center will also provide opportunity to enhance the City's tourist trade.

The Maritime Center must exploit Muskegon's greatest asset: Muskegon Lake. The visual, cultural, historic, habitat and tourist benefits of the Lake should be incorporated into its planning and development. Fishing and water sport activities, such as charter boats, marina's and piers, should be considered. Seafood venues and restaurants would fit nicely. Public access and enjoyment should be an important component to lure people to the Downtown and its activities and businesses. The developing lakeshore bike/recreation path is an excellent example of this development. Enhancing the beauty and appreciation of this exemplary natural resource will change the psychology and perception of the Downtown, and the City in general.

A major focus of the Maritime Center is the compatible blending of shoreline development with the retail and service sectors of Western Avenue to create a sense of visual linkage and ease of pedestrian flow between the two. Historically, such linkage has not existed.

As detailed in later sections of the plan, the Maritime Center has been divided into four subareas based on existing land use, development potential, identified development and redevelopment needs, and other factors. However distinct, some overlap of development opportunities may occur and should be considered.

This plan recommends that all future





Defining a Manageable Downtown Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan



development within the Maritime Center be subject to either special land use or planned unit development guidelines and standards. This will ensure better integration of individual sites, and potentially result in higher quality site use and design. Moreover, these tools provide the City with the highest level of design oversight.

General industrial development within the Maritime Center should be prohibited. Sufficient area exists along other shoreline locations and in other industrial areas to accommodate the City's industrial needs. Similarly, use of the Center for storage, warehousing, bulk product sites, maintenance facilities, and other such uses should be highly discouraged.

Service Center

The fourth area is the Service Center, which gives a home for community, even region-wide services and functions. Government facilities already have a distinct and positive influence on this area, and this should continue. City and County government is well represented, and state and federal government investment should be encouraged. The recent movement of the County government into the former Baker College campus is an excellent means of continuing to develop and enhance this Center.

Other office and professional uses should be encouraged. Several important law firms reside in this area and similar professional activities should continue to find a home. Sensitive retail and commercial development should be encouraged, especially along the major

streets. Such uses provide a transition between the surrounding residential neighborhoods and the other developing GEMS.

As the Service Center further develops, linkages between the other Centers should be increased. Note that the Service Center often acts as a gateway to the Downtown. Besides for providing an beneficial home for professional, government and commercial activities, this Center functions as an important transition zone into the newly enhancing Downtown.



Defining a Manageable Downtown Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan

Figure 4.3 Existing Land Use

